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Foreign language should become an integral part of the elementary school curriculum available to all students by the year 2000. Justification for including language instruction in the core of common learning includes such considerations as (1) language learning, cultural adjustments, and intercultural understanding can best be achieved in childhood years, and (2) equal educational opportunities exist most effectively at the elementary level. To achieve the hoped for instructional goal within the next 30 years, the profession must initiate new programs and strengthen those already functioning through (1) teaching experimentation and innovation, (2) the expanded use of existing instructional materials and the development of new media, and (3) the application of new administrative devices. (AF)

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FLES FOR EVERYBODY*

By
Marjorie Johnston

From my topic you can infer that I believe a foreign language should be part of the common learnings which are taught in the elementary school to all the pupils. Where a foreign language is now offered it should be for all children; otherwise we merely pay lip service to the concept of equal educational opportunities. As rapidly as possible -- I would set this goal to be reached no later than the year 2000 -- all elementary schools should make foreign language an integral part of the curriculum. Of course FLES should be intimately related to bilingual education, which at long last is receiving much deserved attention and support. The non-English-speaking child is really a FLES pupil in English, although the necessity for English as the medium of instruction makes his study more intensive. And every non-English-speaking child should be able to study his mother tongue in school for the same reasons that English is taught to native speakers of English.

Much debate has continued over the years about the place of foreign languages in the curriculum -- any curriculum. But the issue of their value and importance to the individual and to society seems to have been resolved by our growing national need for international communication and intercultural understanding. Learning to understand and speak

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another language is a form of participation in another culture which provides insights to be gained in no other way. As the MLA Policy Statement so well expressed it, "foreign language study provides a new experience, progressively enlarging the pupil's horizon through the introduction to a new medium of communication and a new culture pattern. ... Language skills, like all practical skills, may never be perfected and may be later forgotten, yet the enlarging and enriching results of the cultural experiences endure throughout life." This is a truism which reminds one of the much quoted dictum that education is what remains to the individual after he has forgotten his schooling. Havelock Ellis' statement that "the immense value of becoming acquainted with a foreign language is that we are thereby led into a new world of tradition and thought and feeling" has become so familiar that we forget who said it.

Why foreign language should be included in the common learnings of the elementary school is another question, and I believe its chief justification is two-fold:

First: Childhood is the natural time to learn language, make cultural adjustments, and develop sympathetic attitudes toward people of other cultures.

The research of Penfield and others attests to the specialized capacity of the child for language learning -- a capacity that decreases after age ten. The neurosurgeon's findings only confirm what has seemed obvious from observation. Centuries ago Sir Francis Bacon, you may recall, in his essay "Of Custome and Education," stated that "in languages the tongue is more pliant to all expressions and sounds, the joints more supple to all feats of activitie and motions, in youth then afterwards."

Ease of learning, however, might not of itself justify the early beginning, since some educators say, "Yes, the child can learn the foreign language easily, but should he?" I believe that he should, precisely because of this experience of being "led into a new world of tradition and thought and feeling." If all pupils were to have such an experience the American citizens of tomorrow would not display some of the naive and damaging attitudes which now seem so deep-seated. For example, we would not always expect other peoples to learn English if they want to communicate with us; we would cease believing that Americans are monolingual and cannot learn to communicate with other peoples in their own language; great numbers of Americans would no longer assume that languages are alike except for the words. Some insight into the nature of language would become general.

Second: The only way to assure everybody the experience of learning another language is to teach it in the elementary school.

Considerable numbers of students do not continue their schooling through high school and college, and the elective system makes it unlikely that all those who do finish high school or college will study a foreign language.

Much has been made of the desirability of a continuous sequential program from the early grades through high school, and frequently elementary schools are advised not to offer a foreign language until it can be completely coordinated with both the junior and senior high school foreign language offerings. Certainly such planning is important, but many of the good programs going today would never have become established if such advice had been heeded. I am convinced that even a limited

experience of learning a foreign language is broadening and worth while. Even if all conditions for a sequential program have not been met when the program starts it may still be a good thing to begin. While we wait for the ideal situation generations of pupils are being deprived of a very important educational experience. Enough foreign language to create an awareness of our ignorance could be an instrument in the increase of understanding.

There remains the timetable for establishing foreign language in the curriculum of the elementary school. The year 2000 does not seem to be an unrealistic deadline if we can apply concerted and sustained effort toward the progressive achievement of this goal. That gives us lead time of little more than 30 years. But consider the rapidity of technological and social change and the educational innovations anticipated by the 21st century. Thirty years ago few of us would have thought it possible that the teaching of foreign languages in the United States could expand and improve as rapidly as it already has. Even in the 15 years since Earl McGrath, then the U.S. Commissioner of Education, called the first national conference to consider the role of foreign languages in American schools we have witnessed spectacular developments in foreign language teaching at all levels of the educational system. Now, as in 1953, the climate is right for reassessment and accelerated action. For one thing, public acceptance of the need for language study has been fostered by the experiences and influence of thousands of families who have lived and worked outside the United States. It is not uncommon in some elementary school classrooms to find that a third or more of the children have lived as long as two years in another country.

I'm sure we could all do a bit of brainstorming and come up with a variety of excellent ways of advancing FLES, both in initiating new programs and in strengthening those already going. The single greatest obstacle is the short supply of qualified teachers. Professor Theodore Andersson, however, does not consider this an insurmountable difficulty. In the last chapter of his forthcoming book on FLES, which he kindly sent me in draft, he states: "We have a potential supply of teachers many times the actual supply. Our teacher-training institutions do not lack the resources and facilities for converting these possible recruits into highly qualified teachers. To be sure, the organization of effective training programs of sufficient flexibility to meet great individual differences is going to require considerable open-mindedness, a readiness to face the fact that traditional programs are not necessarily the best, and a willingness on the part of both academic and professional educators to cooperate and to experiment."

The main consideration, it seems to me, is to resolve the issue of whether in fact we do intend the study of foreign language to become part of general education. Having resolved this issue, it would then be possible to work with ingenuity and determination and singleness of purpose on the problems involved.

Fortunately conditions are now good for experimentation and innovation in teaching. Not only is the climate favorable, but financial assistance and many specialized services are also available. There is no longer a severe paucity of instructional materials, and there exist or can be developed many language learning aids both in and out of school. There are films, records, radio, summer camps, foreign visitors. We have

scarcely tapped the potential of television for language learning. Also at our disposal are administrative devices galore -- ungraded schools, multigrading, flexible scheduling, variegation of subject matter, team teaching, paraprofessional personnel, multiphased curricula, programmed instruction, evaluative criteria, zoned and clustered space, media service centers, etc. Why not now, once and for all, break the lock-step system of expecting all pupils to cover a fixed amount of material in the same period of time? Why not enable each individual to proceed at his own pace and according to his temperament and aptitudes? Can we not maintain zest for learning by emphasizing success up to a given stage rather than failure to reach a more advanced level?

I'm reminded of the quotation from Simón Bolívar that Harold Benjamin used in his concluding remarks at the 1953 national conference: "Para juzgar el valor de las revoluciones y los revolucionarios, preciso es observarlos muy de cerca y muy de lejos." In order to assess the situation realistically one must stand in the place of administrators and teachers who have the job to do; yet someone who is not an administrator or a language teacher may see the problems in better perspective. The good soldier, Dr. Benjamin stated, must be thoroughly realistic, even pessimistic, since he knows all the risks, but he must also move to a second stage where he stops looking at all the difficulties and says, NOW IS THE TIME.

If FLES for everybody is indeed to be our goal, this is a call to action, remembering Thomas Huxley's advice: "The rung of a ladder was never meant to rest upon, but only to hold a man's foot long enough to enable him to put the other somewhat higher."